Am I An Atheist Or An Agnostic?

A Plea For Tolerance In The Face Of New Dogmas

by Bertrand Russell (1947)

I speak as one who was intended by my father to be brought up as a Rationalist. He was quite as much of a Rationalist as I am, but he died when I was three years old, and the Court of Chancery decided that I was to have the benefits of a Christian education.

I think perhaps the Court of Chancery might have regretted that since. It does not seem to have done as much good as they hoped. Perhaps you may say that it would be rather a pity if Christian education were to cease, because you would then get no more Rationalists.

They arise chiefly out of reaction to a system of education which considers it quite right that a father should decree that his son should be brought up as a Muggletonian, we will say, or brought up on any other kind of nonsense, but he must on no account be brought up to think rationally. When I was young that was considered to be illegal.

Sin And The Bishops

Since I became a Rationalist I have found that there is still considerable scope in the world for the practical importance of a rationalist outlook, not only in matters of geology, but in all sorts of practical matters, such as divorce and birth control, and a question which has come up quite recently, artificial insemination, where bishops tell us that something is gravely sinful, but it is only gravely sinful because there is some text in the Bible about it. It is not gravely sinful because it does anybody harm, and that is not the argument. As long as you can say, and as long as you can persuade Parliament to go

on saying, that a thing must not be done solely because there is some text in the Bible about it, so long obviously there is great need of Rationalism in practice.

As you may know, I got into great trouble in the United States solely because, on some practical issues, I considered that the ethical advice given in the Bible was not conclusive, and that on some points one should act differently from what the Bible says. On this ground it was decreed by a Law Court that I was not a fit person to teach in any university in the United States, so that I have some practical ground for preferring Rationalism to other outlooks.

Don't Be Too Certain!

The question of how to define Rationalism is not altogether an easy one. I do not think that you could define it by rejection of this or that Christian dogma. It would be perfectly possible to be a complete and absolute Rationalist in the true sense of the term and yet accept this or that dogma.

The question is how to arrive at your opinions and not what your opinions are. The thing in which we believe is the supremacy of reason. If reason should lead you to orthodox conclusions, well and good; you are still a Rationalist. To my mind the essential thing is that one should base one's arguments upon the kind of grounds that are accepted in science, and one should not regard anything that one accepts as quite certain, but only as probable in a greater or a less degree. Not to be absolutely certain is, I think, one of the essential things in rationality.

Proof of God

Here there comes a practical question which has often troubled me. Whenever I go into a foreign country or a prison or any similar place they always ask me what is my religion.

I never know whether I should say "Agnostic" or whether I should say "Atheist". It is a very difficult question and I daresay that some of you have been troubled by it. As a philosopher, if I were speaking to a purely philosophic audience I should say that I ought to describe myself as an Agnostic, because I do not think that there is a conclusive argument by which one prove that there is not a God.

On the other hand, if I am to convey the right impression to the ordinary man in the street I think I ought to say that I am an Atheist, because when I say that I cannot prove that there is not a God, I ought to add equally that I cannot prove that there are not the Homeric gods.

None of us would seriously consider the possibility that all the gods of homer really exist, and yet if you were to set to work to give a logical demonstration that Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and the rest of them did not exist you would find it an awful job. You could not get such proof.

Therefore, in regard to the Olympic gods, speaking to a purely philosophical audience, I would say that I am an Agnostic. But speaking popularly, I think that all of us would say in regard to those gods that we were Atheists. In regard to the Christian God, I should, I think, take exactly the same line.

Skepticism

There is exactly the same degree of possibility and likelihood of the existence of the Christian God as there is of the existence of the Homeric God. I cannot prove that either the Christian God or the Homeric gods do not exist, but I do not think that their existence is an alternative that is sufficiently probable to be worth serious consideration. Therefore, I suppose that that on these documents that they submit to me on these occasions I ought to say "Atheist", although it has been a very difficult problem, and sometimes I have said one and sometimes the other without any clear principle by which to go.

When one admits that nothing is certain one must, I think, also admit that some things are much more nearly certain than others. It is much more nearly certain that we are assembled here tonight than it is that this or that political party is in the right. Certainly there are degrees of certainty, and one should be very careful to emphasize that fact, because otherwise one is landed in an utter skepticism, and complete skepticism would, of course, be totally barren and completely useless.

Persecution

On must remember that some things are very much more probable than others and may be so probable that it is not worth while to remember in practice that they are not wholly certain, except when it comes to questions of persecution.

If it comes to burning somebody at the stake for not believing it, then it is worth while to remember that after all he may be right, and it is not worth while to persecute him.

In general, if a man says, for instance, that the earth is flat, I am quite willing that he should propagate his opinion as hard as he likes. He may, of course, be right but I do not think he is. In practice you will, I think, do better to assume that the earth is round, although, of course, you may be mistaken. Therefore, I do not think we should go in for complete skepticism, but for a doctrine of degrees of probability.

I think that, on the whole, that is the kind of doctrine that the world needs. The world has become very full of new dogmas. he old dogmas have perhaps decayed, but new dogmas have arisen and, on the whole, I think that a dogma is harmful in proportion to its novelty. New dogmas are much worse that old ones.

by Bertrand Russell